

The Temporary and The Greatest

1 Corinthians, Vol. 27

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1 Corinthians 13:8-13

1 Corinthians is a book about problems. After introducing the problems about spiritual gifts, Paul made a transition at the end of what we call chapter 12.

1 Corinthians 12:31: *But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a **still more excellent way**.*

The **more excellent way** is the way of **love**. Chapter 13 shows the **superiority of love over spiritual gifts**. The point of our text for today is that gifts are **only for now in the Church**. Love is an **eternal** virtue. The gifts will eventually be put out of service, but love endures forever. Therefore love is **more excellent** and more important to emphasize in the body of Christ. Gifts are useless without love.

- I. **The Temporary: Gifts (8-12)**
 - A. **Their Endurance** is passing

1 Corinthians 13:8: *Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.*

Love is that Greek word *agapē*. It is love that is known only by the actions it produces.

Never is a Greek word that means **never**. The component parts of it would literally mean something like *not-when* or *not-once* or *not-sometime*. **Fails** is a word that literally means **fall**. Here it means *to fall into decay*. Love doesn't collapse from exhaustion.

1 Corinthians 13:8: *Love never fails; but **IF** there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; **IF** there are tongues, they will cease; **IF** there is knowledge, it will be done away.*

The **three ifs** introduce three spiritual gifts as examples.

Gifts of prophecy is literally the word "prophecies." **Tongues** refers to the gift of languages we have already talked about. It will be the main subject in all of chapter 14. **Knowledge** refers to the gift of knowledge, one of the ones Paul mentioned back in chapter 12.

Will be done away describes **prophecy** and **knowledge**. The word is *katargeō*. It means *to make void; to make of no effect*.

Cease is a completely different word. It's the word *pauō*, which means **to stop**. and it's in a different form, which means that it will **stop by itself**.

The contrast between **will be done away** and **will cease** is obvious and important. Prophecy and knowledge will be rendered inoperative, while tongues will dwindle and cease to operate without any outside agency.

How We Know The Gift Of Tongues Is Not Operating Today

1. The gift of tongues in the New Testament is the ability to speak in an unlearned foreign language. The modern phenomenon called "tongues" is not language.

2. 1 Corinthians 13:8 says this gift would cease. The burden of proof lies with those who claim this gift still operates, because history says otherwise.

3. 1 Corinthians 14:20-21 explains that this gift was a sign to unbelieving Israel that God was turning away from the nation. In A.D. 70, the purpose of this gift was fulfilled.

4. The use of the gift for self-edification is condemned in chapter 14. But self-edification is the stated purpose of the modern so-called gift of tongues.

Summary of Verse 8: Love is more important to major on than spiritual gifts. Love never fails to operate, but spiritual gifts will one day all be out of service. In the case of tongues, Paul predicted it would pass out of use, and history validates that was the case within 10 to 30 years from when he wrote this.

- I. **The Temporary: Gifts (8-12)**
 - A. **Their Endurance** is passing
 - B. **Their Nature** is partial

1 Corinthians 13:9-12: *For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when **the perfect** comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.*

The final battleground in this chapter is the issue of **the perfect**. What is this, that will put of action (same word, *katargeō*) that which is partial?

Perfect is the Greek word *teleion*. It connotes the idea of *reaching an end*. It has three legitimate shades of meaning. It sometimes means **complete**, sometimes **perfect**, and sometimes **mature**. You can see how all three English words could be chosen, depending on context.

There are three respectable views of interpretation of this passage, based on the choices between the shades of meaning: **complete**, **perfect** or **mature** for translating *teleion*.

1. The completion of the New Testament canon, if the meaning is _____ .
2. The Second Coming of Christ, if the meaning is _____ .
3. The maturing of the body of Christ, if the meaning is _____ .

Verse 10 strongly supports the idea of something complete rendering obsolete that which is incomplete.

Verse 11 strongly supports the idea of something mature rendering obsolete that which is immature.

Verse 12 strongly supports the idea of something perfect rendering obsolete that which is imperfect.

2 Peter 3:16 describes completing the New Testament.

Ephesians 4:11-16 encourages the ongoing process of maturing in the body of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 means Paul understood Christ could return during his lifetime.

Childish things are things characteristic of the infancy of the church.

Speak as a child alludes to tongues.

Think as a child alludes to the era of prophecy.

Reason as a child alludes to knowledge that gradually accumulates.

All those things are replaced by **maturity**. Paul seems to have understood that the era of infancy and childhood and early reasoning, was quickly passing, because he says:

1 Corinthians 13:11: . . . *when I became a man, I did away with childish things.*

1 Corinthians 13:12: *For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.*

The contrast is between what it's like now and what it will be like when we are with the Lord. That is, before and after the Second Coming of Christ. Until that time, the Church continues to make the best possible use of **the partial**, which includes the 27 books of the New Testament and the 39 books of the Old Testament. Even this fantastic inspired collection will some day be seen as only a small fraction of all the God has for us.

My conclusion about **the perfect** is that I see **all three shades of meaning as legitimate**, and each one containing an element of important truth. I think many of the interpretations of this passage amount to being more precise than Paul was or intended for us to be.

- I. **The Temporary: Gifts** (8-12)
 - A. **Their Endurance** is passing
 - B. **Their Nature** is partial
- II. **The Greatest: Love** (13)

1 Corinthians 13:13: *But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

Faith, hope and **love** are the common New Testament triad of attributes that belong to believers. All three have guaranteed permanence, but that isn't true of spiritual gifts.

Faith is the trust in Christ which is common to every child of God.

Hope is our confidence and assurance of our future in God's hands. It enables us to walk by faith and endure all trials and persecution that comes our way.

Love is that great virtue described in 13:4-7, which is the motivation for all good things done in the name of Christ.

All three of these are superior in importance to spiritual gifts. **But only love is eternal!**

Faith will one day be exchanged for sight.

Hope will one day be exchanged for fulfilment when we receive our inheritance.

But the greatest of these is love, because **God is love** (1 John 4:8).

Love, therefore, is the **greater** issue and the **more excellent** way.